MEMORIES of a Radar Mechanic, WW2

Kevin Kennedy - June 2004

My mate, Jim, and I enrolled in the Royal Australian Navy in June 1942. After our medical checks, Jim was destined to be a Stoker because of his eyesight and it was Ordinary Seaman for me. Just before the "call up" in July, I was talked into applying for an Officer training course.

A big mob of us got instructions to be on Platform No1, Flinders Street Station at 9am on 15th July, where we proceeded to fill a steam train destined for Crib Point. On alighting, Stokers were instructed to muster to the left and Ordinary Seaman to the right. I rarely met up with Jim again until after discharge in 1946.

It was now time to get kitted up and when my turn came, I was given a hammock but no uniform of any sort because of the potential Officer course. Hence I paraded in my grey civvies for a couple of weeks and was very conspicuous amongst the rest of the uniformed mob.

We had some training in the way of marching in unison just prior to a special march-past of a visiting high-ranking Officer. There would have been at least 1000 of us marching four abreast across the Parade Ground to give the salute. The Coral Sea Battle was on at the time so there was a general air of anxiety amongst the rookies. In those days I was a keen dancer and considered I had some skills in keeping time with the beat of the music – drums in this case. It was my judgement that the mob were "racing" ahead of the beat so I adjusted to just a fraction behind their timing. Over the loud hailer came a yell from the Chief Petty Officer in charge of the assembly, "pick 'em up Kennedy!" Remember I'm the only one in civvies and probably the only name the CPO knew. I quickly adjusted my timing and my learning curve.

Just after this outburst, the sirens went. Was it the real thing? We rookies didn't know but, following early instructions, we tucked our white caps under the arm, (I had none) and made for the trenches.

In the ensuing weeks we did a bit of rifle drill and I recall one occasion when I was detailed to be a member of the crew to do some training in rowing a Whaler. Being a bit under the average size, I was allocated the position at the pointy end. From that position I had reduced leverage advantage and it took all my strength to maintain the heavy oar horizontal at prolonged "rest" periods. I enjoyed the experience.

After a few weeks of being an un-uniformed sailor, volunteers were called for a Radio/Radar Mechanic's course. I elected to stay with my new mates on the Lower Deck and was promptly kitted out in my "round rig".

After six weeks at HMAS Cerberus, Crib Point, I was transferred to HMAS Lonsdale, Port Melbourne on 31st August. Whilst waiting for the Radio Course, I spent a few weeks as Petty Officers' Messman. The POs regularly came in for toast and tea or coffee between meals and during that time I reached my maximum life-weight.

The six members of our Class No10 or 11 to attend the Melbourne Technical College to do the Radio part of our training, were soon ready

to go. We were a close-knit and happy group. Most of us were keen on being fit and spent most late afternoons in the gym in the Assembly Hall at “Lonsdale”. Rope climbing was an activity that seemed to appeal, possibly with a nostalgic reaction to our views of the life of a sailor back in the windjammer days of our forefathers. A PO Gym Instructor often joined us and I regret to recall that on one occasion I broke one of his front teeth with my knee. I can only recall an amused reaction by me and that is the cause of my regret.

A vivid memory of the early training days is travelling in the back of a flattop truck to and from HMAS Lonsdale in Port Melbourne and the Melbourne Tech on the other side of town. Apart from having a few verbals with the pedestrians as we went along, today, soft seats and seatbelts would be the order-of-the-day.

Bert Hanson, Alan Hunt, Basil Balme, mostly hidden, Peter Weedon, Kevin

There were six of us in our Class; the photo was taken on the roof of the Melbourne Technical College. Col Stewart took the photograph. We were outnumbered by about four to one by RAAF Trainees. At lunchtime, the RAAF Trainees were marched up to the Exhibition Building. We were given one and sixpence or two shillings for our lunch each day. We spent half of it going to the Melbourne Baths nearby where we hired a towel and triangular costume and bought fruit with the change.

Shortly after finishing the radio section of our course, we were posted back to “Cerberus” at Flinders, where we were discharged from the RANR and re-enlisted in the RAN and given a new number. I don't recall the move but I suspect it was to enlist us in the RAN in the event of any conflict or need that might arise after our discharge at the end of the current War. We also were given our first “Hook” and re-kitted in “Square Rig”.

It was during this second stay at "Cerberus" that Bert Hanson married Mary in Euroa, Ned Kelly country north of Melbourne. I was best man at the wedding. Bert was part way through a University course in Brisbane when he joined up; he subsequently graduated after the War. At the time of his retirement, Bert was Director General of the Commonwealth Forestry and Timber Bureau. Bert was widowed about 12 months ago and I visited him earlier this year (2004) in a Retirement Village in Kew, Vic. He has the typical few problems of our age group but is in full control of his mental faculties. I think Bert is the only Radar acquaintance with whom I have had contact since the War years.

Wedding of Mary Dean and Bert Hanson at Euroa 24th

Col Stewart was another Queenslander and a good mate. During our second stint at Cerberus, we must have had a dental inspection and Col was programmed to have three teeth removed. He was given a general anaesthetic and when he woke up he discovered that all of his teeth had been extracted. Whilst recovering in hospital he contracted a dose of "crabs" – sailors will know them - with the result that he was shaved of all hair from top to toe. It was the time of Bert's wedding and Col was another invitee. In his apology for not being able to attend the wedding, he wrote that he "was like a new born babe – no hair and no teeth". He had a good sense of humour for all occasions.

After the conclusion of our Radar Course No6 at HMAS Watson at South Head, Sydney, Col and I were both stationed at the RAN Depot on the banks of the Brisbane River. We had more good times together and on a number of occasions we hitchhiked from Southport to Coolangatta for a weekend at the guesthouse there. It is difficult to believe that the thriving Gold Coast of today was a sleepy farming place with very few cars and fewer pick-ups, not so long ago. I next caught up with Col when he was stationed at Madang in New Guinea where we often called in. He was still there at the end of the War when I acquired from him some very useful tools and the like that were subsequently put to good use when building our homes. Col was a standard Petty Officer like the rest of us in those days. Several years later, an unmistakeable voice from behind, in Flinders Street, Melbourne, said "G'day Kennedy". He was still in uniform and advised that he was now a "Commissioned Warrant Officer"! His slender tropical shape had long gone for he was now about twice the size that I associated him with. We had good times together. I note that Col rose to the rank of Commodore in the RAN.

Alan "Lofty" Hunt was in our classes. He was married, so his interests were elsewhere at leisure times. He was a relatively old salt at the time

and had transferred from the Sick Bay with a few yarns, one of which I remember. It went something like:- This high-ranking medical officer-in-charge, I forget his name, reporting on an operation that he had just performed on a nameless matelot was – “Operation successful, Patient dead.”

Basil “Dood” Balme was also in our classes. He had academic attitudes but I can recall his performance on the evening of my 21st birthday, which I had endeavoured to conceal, until a telegram or two arrived. It was in between the two courses when we were back at Cerberus for the intervening period. I well recall the cold pork chop, which was the main dish for the evening meal. Once the birthday was revealed, it was time for a celebration. A clear recall is Basil sitting up in his hammock, with his partial plate out and frothing at the mouth from the cake of soap he was eating. If Basil is listening he may not appreciate these comments. After the War, he went to qualify in Geology, I believe, gained his PhD, and I believe he was doing research in palaeontology, and no doubt lectured at the University of Western Australia.

Peter Weedon was a lad from Western Australia. I do not recall him later at HMAS Watson for the Radar course but on one occasion we had some spare time and went onto the roof of the Melbourne Tech, where three of us climbed up the aerial tower, maybe 10m high, and sat on the small platform just below the aerials. With some reluctance, Peter followed but was a trembling mess when he got to the top. I cannot recall how we got him down. He would not have enjoyed climbing to the top of the mast of a Corvette to service the “bed-stead array” up there! I found it an interesting observation site.

Several others joined us at “Watson” in Class 6 when we were doing the Radar part of our training. One lad, can’t recall his name at the moment, was obviously courting a lass back in his hometown in Adelaide. He seemed to be under the thumb as, when he was frequently late with his weekly letter, he would catch a midnight tram from Bondi where we were living, to post his letter “on time” at the GPO. I wonder if they married and who wore the pants? I’m pretty sure he was Don Badman.

I enjoyed the stay at HMAS Watson. We had a few free days before our Radar course started and spent them precariously perched, out of sight, high on the cliffs in the glorious sunshine overlooking Sydney Heads and surveying our future Tasman Sea home and beyond. Lofty Hunt had preceded us to Sydney, probably to find a home for his wife and self and fortunately he found a home for four or was it five of us, not far up the road from Bondi Beach. The landlady looked after us well with dinner, bed and breakfast and from there we explored Sydney and became familiar with its attractions.

Our postings for the real life came out and I was destined to “stand-by” Corvette HMAS Kiama which was in the final stages of construction at Evans Deakin Yard, just downstream of the Storey Bridge in the Brisbane River. Our Radio/Radar class group was disbanded, we parted

and our friendships were broken but not forgotten and we probably lost our familiar nicknames; mine was “Kanga”.

Our Skipper on the Kiama was Sam Benson, a very capable, skilled and logical sailor. He maintained a happy crew and the relationships have continued since the War. He later became the Labor Member for Port Melbourne or was it Williamstown. On one occasion he invited my wife and me to join him at Parliament House Canberra where we occupied privileged seats during a Parliamentary Session – a choice memory. Sam was a man of high principles who disagreed with the Labor Government’s policy on Vietman, I think it was, and was subsequently expelled from the Labor Party. However he contested the next election as an Independent and won well, so his qualities were valued beyond his Naval acquaintances.

We did our preliminary trials in the calm waters of Moreton Bay before the big test on our maiden run to Sydney. I was never very comfortable in heavy seas and with many of the crew, mostly teenagers and early twenties, we experienced the rigours of sea sickness. I am certain that the old familiar dance floor on our first night in Sydney was in sync with the deck of the Kiama.

At Garden Island I reported that our 286, the Radar with the bedstead array atop the mast, was not working well. The heavy coax cable that ran up the mast was taken down and given the heat treatment but to no avail. I believe our 286 never earned its keep, despite help at times from other experts.

Our “shake-down” trials then took place in Broken Bay, upstream from the mouth of the Hawkesbury River, NSW. Our “Jimmy”, second in charge, was Lieut Bill Folk. His job seemed to be to bond us as a team and “knock us in to shape”. His efforts contributed to developing happy and loyal friendships lasting for the next two years and beyond. I was still a rookie at those shake-down trials and I think Bill Folk may have found me a bit of a problem. I had my “hook”, lowest of the non-commissioned ranks and living in the Seaman’s Mess. I sensed that Bill was constrained from giving me menial tasks like scrubbing the decks, and yet I needed to be initiated. Leading Seamen (one “hook”) were old salts and needed no breaking in. Other technical staff, like our Artificers, were Petty Officers and thus had their own Mess. On one occasion, I was given an early morning exercise to row in our life-boat – but I enjoyed that. Another episode in Broken Bay was when we set the bush on the hillside on fire whilst doing gunnery practice. A team was despatched to put the fire out. I live on the Central Coast now – contemplate the outcry if a similar exercise was conducted today!

HMAS Kiama in Broken Bay, 1943

I made a very fortunate choice on our first night on board when we each had to select a spot to sling our hammock. I chose the outer spot under the Port Wing of the Bridge. The fresh air and sea breezes enjoyed from there were conducive to a good night's sleep. It was also fairly close to the Radar operations room – room is a gross overstatement. I slept there throughout my time on the Kiama, including the last night at Garden Island when I was the lone person on board. It was the eve of handing the ship over to Garden Island for decommissioning.

The person who occupied the in-board and only other "sling" under the wing of the Bridge was Radio Telegraphist Foster "Foz" Williams. He was a good mate and I well recall a game of Aussie Rules on Thursday Island and kick-to-kick whenever we could get a good spot ashore. One such spot was at Torokina on the west coast of Bougainville Island. After the War, Foz's prowess as an Aussie Rules footballer became well known throughout Australia. He captained Port Adelaide and also South Australia in the "State of Origin" matches. He coached Port Adelaide for many years; his son Mark is following in his footsteps. In 2001 my wife and I were touring in the Flinders Ranges and I had a plan to call on Foz; it was 55 years since we had bid farewell. Sadly I was told that Foz had died a few weeks before and that he was held in such high esteem in South Australia that he was given a State Funeral.

I sailed every nautical mile on the Kiama's voyages and was the last of our crew to be on board when she was handed over at Garden Island in early 1946. As far as my technical duties were concerned, I had then, and still have, a philosophy that says "if it works, don't fix it". I had a reasonably charmed life as our A272 (others may correct the names I give these radar sets) gave a sterling performance and I was rarely disturbed in my hammock slung under the port wing.

To recall a few incidents:- We were steaming up the eastern coast of New Guinea, near the border of (now) West Irian, when I got a shake and advised that the radar had gone crazy and was recording multiple echoes ahead. I inspected and advised that all looked real. By this time Benson would have been on the Bridge so he ordered a Star Shell, think that's the name, to be launched ahead. The radar was proven to be right as we illuminated an American Armada on its way to bombard Hollandia. I am still amazed that we weren't blown out of the water by those trigger-happy Yanks who, the next morning destroyed all living fauna and flora for miles around Hollandia. About a day later we called into Hollandia and a group of us went ashore for a bit of relief, unarmed except for a dog, which was illegally on board since a recent visit to our mainland. The poor dog had not seen a post or tree for so long and at the sight of so many defoliated palms still standing, he went berserk and we never saw him again. I assume he is still AWL. Having gone inland till it was time to return to the shore we were met by a couple of armed Yanks on patrol. They were

amazed to see us and all with our white headgear. We were given advice that we were lucky to be alive.

This photograph of the damaged Mission Church at Hollandia was taken on our run ashore. I picked up poor quality counterfeit paper and coin money in Australian currency in the grounds around this Church. It was my thought at the time that the Japanese who had just left the area, or been killed, probably thought that they were already in Australia.

In early September 1944 we took on board at Lae, PNG about 80 Commandos – they occupied most of the space available on the Upper Deck. Our mission was to land them at Jacquinot Bay, New Britain before dawn the following day; the area was believed to be occupied by the Japanese. We were under-way all night and in the early hours of the morning I was given a “shake” to check the Radar as it was “giving false information” on the land “echoes”. Jack Haskel was in control on the Bridge at the time when I reported that all seemed in order with the Radar. Sam was no doubt summoned to the Bridge and the navigation check revealed that we were not where we thought we were and we were now late for our pre-dawn target. Full steam ahead got us close to the Heads at dawn and the loyal Coast Guard Lieutenant Black was up amongst the palms on the western Head. I recall seeing his flashing light as he guided us on. It was a tense time but there was no action as we sailed into the Bay and dropped anchor. The Commandos went ashore and Lieut Black came aboard with his “wild” Natives. They were a wild mob alright and Sam Benson advised us to give them anything they wanted. Their main need seemed to be paper for smoking so all the old newspapers came out of the lockers. Lieut Black was reprimanded by the Senior Army Officer still on board, for not wearing the regulation clothes to protect him from mosquitoes. It is my impression that Black soon left afterwards with his Native troop, somewhat disgusted with the command. Lieut Black was a very brave man. I understand that his troop would enter Japanese camps after dark and slit throats. A few months later, the PNG news sheet, which sometimes came to our Skipper, advised that Lieut Black had met his fate. My respect for the man lingers.

After a few days the Commandos reported that they had discovered evidence that the Japanese had vacated Jacquinot Bay, probably the day before we arrived.

I should add that my comments and the names I use are from my memory bank, which is not always reliable and does not have the benefit of official documents.

Another interesting episode was a night’s watch at Buka Passage, between Buka and Bougainville Islands. The Japanese were reported to be running barges across the Passage and a seaplane at times landed in the early morning. Our assignment was to carry out a Radar search and to engage the enemy, as appropriate. The night was dark and stormy and as no evidence came up on the Radar screen, our Skipper decided to drop anchor rather than cruise for the night. At dawn, orders were given to “up anchor” but the steering mechanism was tangled or unserviceable and for the next hour we drifted in an enemy minefield

and in range of known enemy guns. It is my opinion that the Japs probably judged us a decoy as there was no action and after our senior CPO Engineer went over the side and solved our problem, we crept quietly away to a safer place.

Remember the IFF, “Identification Friend or Foe”? We were forbidden to do any work on it but if we were at risk of going down or being overtaken, it was my duty to blow it up. It was used in conjunction with the 286 – earlier reported as being pretty useless. But it did trigger off our IFF, just across the passage, or that of an aircraft within visible range! On one evening we were carrying out a bombardment on the shores near Buka Passage, under the observant eyes of a spotting RAAF aircraft. Radio silence seemed to be the order-of-the-day under these circumstances, but the Pilot broke the silence to advise “your cockerel is not crowing”. So perhaps our IFF never worked either!

The only problem I had with the A272 radar was an unserviceable generator. It was located on the Petty Officers’ deck, just outside the CPO Stoker’s cabin, which recalls another story. We made several visits to Seadler Harbour, Manus Island in the Admiralty Islands. On one of our shore excursions we came across a large collection of human bones. Assuming they were of the enemy, a few skulls were picked up. (It is with some reservation that I refer to this incident). Our CPO Stoker was our oldest crewmember; we named him “Snowy”. He had a skull, which shared his cabin for a while with the intention of making it the feature of a reading light. A bad nightmare changed his mind and he tossed it out the porthole. Another Stoker negotiated a deal to swap his skull for a bottle of whisky with a crewmember of an Oil Tanker to which we were tied as we took on fuel. The Tanker was almost empty so its upper deck was probably 10 metres above ours. The deal was agreed and the bottle of whisky was lowered on a long rope. Just after the skull was tied in the place of the bottle, our fuelling was completed and order was given “Let go”. Our engines were engaged and we sailed away. Our Stoker cut the rope and retrieved the skull. I witnessed that event and privately hoped that we would not be required to fuel from that same tanker again.

We were in Rabaul Harbour at the time of the surrender. I was detailed to visit a Jap Radar Station in the hills north-west of Rabaul. I accompanied a Radar Officer from a larger HMAS ship – I was on HMAS Kiama, a Corvette. We travelled in a jeep to some high country, which reminded me of the Blue Mountains at Katoomba. We had a Japanese interpreter who spoke good English. The site was underground so the Lieutenant and driver went off to inspect the equipment and I was left in the jeep with the interpreter and a revolver and I was instructed, “not to fraternise with the Jap soldier”. We had a good old yarn. He was a very nice, decent chap and was longing to get home to his wife and children. The stupidity of war!

We had a few sorties whilst in the Rabaul Harbour. I climbed the active volcano on the eastern Headland and ventured into the tunnels made by the Japanese into the inactive volcano on the western Headland. One tunnel lead us to a workshop where I acquired a number

of useful tools as well as quite a few radio components. Apart from a useful box and a unique adjustable spanner, these items have been dispersed.

Shortly after the surrender we were on our way to Manus Island from Rabaul, along the east coast of New Ireland for the first time. We called in to Kavieng and a landing party was put ashore, well armed this time, as the Japs there may not have received news that the War was over. True to their behaviour, our party made contact with the Japs and confiscated all the Samurai swords they could lay their hands on, much to the chagrin of the Army when they arrived later. But by this time we were sailing north. There were not enough swords to go round our crew so a ballot was held and I won a sword. It has been passed on to a member of our family who has a propensity for old things and may value this piece of information.

Some time in 1944 I received my second hook and was inducted into the Petty Officers Mess. I recall a Radar Officer coming on board to assess my suitability. His only question was to ask me to describe the function/action of the “Buggery Bar”. I had not understood this when we had a brief lesson on it back at HMAS Watson. I think I gave him an honest answer and suggested that he explain it to me. I got my hook anyway.

Life in the PO’s Mess was more comfortable. Commissioned Officers could only visit if invited. I never saw any of them on our deck. Up to midday, when I had no “real” duties, I could remain in the Mess and spent many an hour playing mah-jong with an “off-duty” Stoker PO. After noon in the tropics was “stand-down” for the “off duty” Watch so we gathered on the fo’c’sle to sun-bathe. A particular mate was PO Stoker Johnny “Square Deal” Poulter. I used to visit him occasionally in the Boiler Room, which was the ideal location for drying my laundry. On one occasion in Torokina, Bougainville Island, I was visiting Johnny when the bells began to ring. Every time there was a change of speed decision made on the Bridge it would ring the appropriate message in the Boiler Room. The person in charge would adjust the flame to meet the demands of the Engine Room as well as control the smoke emission. On the occasion in question the bells rang continuously to which it was impossible to respond. After some frustration, Johnny threw his arms in the air and gave up. I ventured out on to the deck to see that we were “coming along- side” with some hesitation. The problem was that Harry Godden was having his first full control at this exercise, as he was about to replace Sam Benson as our Skipper. Sam, I think, was recently promoted to Lt Commander and was about to go to higher duties. Harry Godden in later years skippered his own yacht in the famous Sydney to Hobart competitions.

Tanned up, 1945

In hindsight I have only one regret that comes to mind. I had lots of spare time in my two years at sea on the “Kiama” and it was a time when I could have done correspondence courses on subjects of interest.

After discharge mid 1946, I returned to my clerical position in the Commonwealth Public Service, on “higher duties” - read more pay - but with little to do and I found the general attitude to work by those about me, not to my liking. So with very little advice available, compared to today, I enrolled on the spur of the moment, to take a Science Degree course in Physics at Melbourne University, under the Rehabilitation Scheme. It was a hard slug at the time but I gained a Cadetship in Geophysics a year later, so my future program took on a realistic shape.

On reflecting now, in my 24th year of retirement from the workforce, I believe my time in the Navy was good to and for me, then and since.

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